

Supplemental Report 5

The Mayor's Charter School Accountability System

Charters are granted on a basic trade-off of autonomy for accountability. With the support of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Mayor's Office has developed a model accountability system through which the schools and the Mayor's Office establish expectations, monitor progress, report to the public, and make informed decisions about the future of the schools.

Indiana's charter schools law and the state's accountability policies have set the broad context within which the Mayor has developed his system of accountability for charter schools. In addition to fulfilling important state requirements such as annual fall testing through the state assessment system (ISTEP+), the Mayor's aim is to create an approach to accountability that provides other practical benefits to charter schools, families, and the public. Therefore, Mayor-sponsored charter schools annually participate in an additional fall and spring assessment to measure student progress over the course of the year, and the Mayor's Office also collects information about the schools' performance through in-depth third-party site visits, surveys of parents and teachers, and reviews of schools' governance and financial performance. These various evaluative pieces create a fundamentally new kind of relationship among public schools, the agencies that oversee them, families, and the larger public.

To achieve this goal, the Mayor's accountability system for charter schools is designed to support the following basic principles:

- **Autonomy** – enabling schools to implement their own unique approaches to quality public education;
- **Value** – providing schools with tools and information that help them improve performance;
- **Low burden** – minimizing the amount of time, effort, and expense needed to comply with requirements;
- **Transparency** – providing maximum information to parents, the schools, and the public about school performance and the accountability process; and
- **Responsibility** – ensuring that the Mayor has sufficient information to carry out his responsibilities for overseeing charter schools that are of the highest quality, accessible to all, and in compliance with all applicable laws.

Setting Expectations

The Mayor's Office is committed to implementing a charter school oversight system that is clear from the outset and helpful to all schools in continuously improving. An essential tool for this oversight system, to be used by both the Mayor's Office and the schools, is the Charter School Improvement Framework. This Framework serves two important purposes: (1) to inform ongoing oversight by the Mayor's Office and (2) to help each school in continually assessing and improving its performance. The Framework provides a foundation of common evaluation elements for all of the Mayor's charter schools. The content of this Framework serves as a **floor** rather than a ceiling for school performance and continuous improvement. It is expected that each school will develop and enrich this basic accountability plan with additional measures to assess and demonstrate achievement of its specific mission.

Common Measures: The Charter School Improvement Framework

The Charter School Improvement Framework is divided into four sections:

- 1. Is the academic program a success?**
- 2. Is the organization viable?**
- 3. Is the school meeting its operational and access obligations?**
- 4. Is the school providing the appropriate conditions for success?**

When measuring a given school's performance, the school leadership and the Mayor's Office will examine several sub-questions in relation to each of the four core questions. Only the first three sections (academic performance, organizational viability, and operations/access) and their respective sub-questions will be rated on a four-point scale (*Does Not Meet Standard*, *Approaching Standard*, *Meets Standard*, and *Exceeds Standard*). For a detailed description of the Framework and the full rubric (and sub-questions) for each section, go to

http://www.indygov.org/mayor/charter/accountability_report.

Measuring a school's academic progress is the most important and complex part of this framework. The Mayor's Office has attempted to create a set of indicators that will capture each school's: 1) ***absolute performance*** (the percentage of students that are "proficient" in a given subject); 2) ***improvement over time*** (the academic growth of individual students over time); and 3) ***comparative performance*** (how well a given school did relative to other local public educational options).

In making renewal and revocation decisions, the Mayor's Office will focus first on each school's objectively measurable performance outcomes under the first three questions in the Framework. The fourth question in the Framework will serve to inform the Mayor's Office about whether or not the school is on the right path for successfully meeting the outcomes in the first three questions. More importantly, well before the renewal decision, school self-assessments and external reviews of school academics, finances, and other reporting requirements organized under this Framework will provide solid data that should inform parents' decisions about sending their children to the charter school and each school's continuous improvement efforts.

Unique Measures: Goals Established by the School

While the Framework is meant to form the foundation of each school's accountability plan, each school identifies additional customized mission-specific goals and objectives by which to measure its performance. An expert in school accountability works with each school to develop goals and measures specific to the school's particular mission and target population. The school accountability plans build on the goals and contractual obligations described in each founding group's charter school agreement and are meant to guide the school's progress through its first seven-year charter. The Mayor's Office has developed an accountability handbook to assist charter founders in building their accountability plans. For more information about the accountability plans, refer to the Accountability Handbook, which may be accessed on-line. (See the box below for more information.)

The accountability plan serves as part of a school improvement process and will help the school to:

- establish a clear set of ambitious, attainable, and measurable goals for the entire school community;
- evaluate school performance within a framework that includes student performance, financial, compliance, and organizational data;
- identify its strengths and weaknesses;

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- engage parents in the mission and goals of the school as well as help inform their school selection process; and
 - demonstrate public accountability for results by creating a transparent set of objectives and measures.

Gathering the Data

The Mayor's Office collects data in a wide range of ways to support the measures of school performance outlined in the Framework. While it will rely on the usual panoply of reports and statistical information available about schools, the accountability system also includes alternative ways of keeping tabs on a wide range of indicators of school performance. And, although charter schools are free from many restrictions, they still have to comply with basic public school laws and regulations on issues ranging from financial probity to special education, and they must file numerous reports with the state and the Mayor's Office. Consequently, the Mayor's Office devoted significant resources through the Casey Foundation's support to developing systems to monitor schools' compliance *and* help them meet their compliance requirements. The charter schools themselves are ultimately responsible for complying with all applicable laws and regulations.

Prior actions. Each school's charter outlines a series of steps that must be completed before a school may provide instruction to students. Prior actions include but are not limited to: fully preparing facilities, including obtaining necessary permits and successfully completing inspections; developing detailed plans for special education, curriculum, transportation, and school safety that comply with all applicable laws; and finalizing budgets, financial plans, and accounting procedures that are in accordance with state rules. To view a list of the prior actions, refer to the attachments to the charter agreement; the charter and its attachments may be accessed on-line. (See the box below for more information.)

Pre-opening checklist and visits. Mayor's Office staff conducts visits with each new school before it opens its doors for the first time to students and families. The purpose of these visits is to determine whether the school is focusing upon a wide range of items from safety to staffing that are critical for a new school to successfully address prior to opening. Schools are provided with a detailed checklist prior to the visits; during each visit the Mayor's Office reviews documentation and other evidence that items on the checklist have been satisfactorily addressed. A sample of the pre-opening checklist may be accessed on-line. (See the box below for more information.)

Annual testing. Each school must conduct standardized tests of reading and mathematics for every student, every year. To meet state requirements, schools are required to administer ISTEP+ every fall to students in grades 3-10 (as these tests become available in all grades). The Mayor's Office has an additional requirement that students be tested in the fall and spring in order to collect comparable, longitudinal data to measure student growth over the course of the school year. This consistent year-to-year testing will allow the Mayor's Office to assess the "value-added" by each school – the degree to which the school contributes to the learning of its students. This kind of analysis will in turn prove critical in the Mayor's Office's assessment of school progress.

Site visits. Each Mayor-sponsored school is subject to periodic site visits throughout the seven-year term of the charter. The site visits give reviewers the opportunity to see in person what lies behind the test scores and reports that typically form the core of school oversight. Team members talk to board members, students, teachers, administrators and parents; visit classrooms; and review documents and materials. Reviewers provide verbal reports to the schools at the end of their visits, and provide written comments citing commendations and areas for improvement. The Center of Excellence in Leadership of Learning (CELL) at the University of Indianapolis developed the site visit

Accountability-related documents developed by the Mayor's Office

- Charter School Accountability Handbook
- Charter School Performance Framework
- The "Charter" – Charter School Agreement
- Pre-Opening Visit Checklist
- Expert Site Visit Review Process and Protocol
- Survey of Mayor-Sponsored Charter School Parents
- Survey of Mayor-Sponsored Charter School Staffs
- Charter School Governance Handbook

These documents are available on-line at http://www.indygov.org/mayor/charter/accountability_report.

process and also implemented the site visits for the Mayor's Office in 2002-2003. In addition to CELL's accountability expert, other site visit team members included experienced public school teachers and administrators. A sample site visit protocol may be accessed on-line. (See box for more information.)

Surveys. Surveys are administered in the spring to gather information from parents, staff, and (as appropriate) students. Survey items align with the Mayor's Charter School Improvement Framework. Each school may also identify additional survey items that align with the school's unique purposes and goals. CELL, at the University of Indianapolis, developed the survey protocol and process. To maintain third party objectivity, CELL also administered the 2003 surveys, collected the data, and analyzed the results. Sample copies of the parent and teacher surveys may be accessed on-line. (See box for more information.)

Governance and financial reviews. The Mayor's Office has developed a Governance Handbook with

guidelines to determine whether its schools are in compliance with their charters and all applicable laws. The handbook outlines governance-related information the schools are required to submit throughout the school year and the Mayor's Office's plans for reviewing this information. In addition, the Mayor's Office conducts annual governance site visits to each school. These reviews focus on issues related to the governance and general management of the Mayor-sponsored charter schools. Topics covered in detail by the governance evaluation plan include board leadership, management controls and assessments, and personnel development and support. On a quarterly schedule, the Mayor's Office will monitor the schools' financial and organizational health through the schools' financial statements. An independent accounting firm will also review schools' finances using analysis software designed specifically to evaluate Mayor-sponsored charter schools. For a detailed description of governance oversight established by the Mayor's Office, refer to the Governance Handbook, which may be accessed on-line. (See box for more information.)

Mid-charter review. In the fourth year of the school's seven-year charter term, the Mayor's Office will prepare a comprehensive review of the school's performance to that point. This review will begin with a thorough *self-review* of the school's performance for the first three years of operation, examining all the areas covered in the Framework and any additional measures of success developed by the school. This self-assessment will be combined with a third-party *multi-day on-site review* to corroborate and build upon the school's self evaluation. A subsequent public report on the school's performance to date will follow. This report will be informed by a data array collected by the Mayor's Office that includes the annual site visits, parent and staff surveys, financial reviews, and reporting information as well as each school's performance data in relation to the school's accountability plan.

Using the Data

All of these assessments will serve to inform parents and the greater public about how these schools are doing. These assessments will also provide critical information for both the Mayor's Office – for

purposes of making high-stakes decisions about schools – and the schools – for the purposes of enhancing their school programs over time.

Informing the public. The Mayor’s Office is committed to making its charter school oversight process as transparent and useful as possible to all parties. The Mayor will continue to produce reports, like this one, that will provide information about how each school is performing, including test score analysis, site visit and survey results, and an analysis of how the school is spending its public dollars. Information about school performance will also be posted to the Mayor’s charter school website so that families and community members can access up-to-date information about each school. Additionally, the mid-charter review conducted in the school’s fourth year will serve to provide a good explanation to the legislature and the general public about how effectively public dollars are being spent.

Informing the Mayor’s Office. The Mayor’s Office will continuously use the data collected to ensure schools are on track to fulfilling the terms of their charters, including meeting the common goals outlined for all schools as well as the school’s individual goals. Ultimately, charter renewal decisions will be informed by all of the data collected by the Mayor’s Office in the first six years of the school’s charter term. In the sixth year, the school must submit a renewal petition that makes the argument for why the school should maintain its charter. The Mayor’s Office will consider this renewal petition in conjunction with the mid-charter review, the site visit reports, survey results, governance reviews, academic testing performance, and financial audits to make a decision about whether a school should maintain its charter beyond year seven.

Informing the schools. The data will provide schools with important information they can use to improve their academic programs and organizational processes. For example, the site visits conducted during this first year of operation generated useful critiques by the expert reviewers about the primary areas schools should target for improvement in the 2003-04 school year as well as the primary areas in which the schools excel. The reviewers also met with school leaders at the end of their visits to point out their general observations about how the school was running in every aspect ranging from student learning and classroom management to how the school manages its staff and finances. Additionally, the mid-charter review conducted in the school’s fourth year will provide the school with a straightforward understanding of what it will need to work on in the subsequent three years. This review will also give schools and parents of enrolled students adequate notice of any challenges identified and ample opportunity to address them prior to the Mayor’s renewal decisions. And, among other uses for the data, the surveys administered annually will help the school to understand how its important constituents – parents, teachers, and students – perceive the school as a whole and areas that need to be improved to increase levels of satisfaction.